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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9356

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000966

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, EUR/ACE, IIP

E.O. 12598: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL EAID SCUL KPAO TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENBASHY AMERICAN CORNER: MAYOR SAYS ONLY FOREIGN
MINISTER CAN DECIDE - FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS OTHERWISE

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: The American Corner in the Caspian Sea port city of Turkmenbashy, closed since May 2005, can reopen if we find an "appropriate stand-alone building." This would entail higher expenses than normal for an American Corner. See action request in para eight below. END SUMMARY

¶3. (U) The Turkmenbashy American Corner opened in November 2002 and functioned normally until May 2005, when it had to vacate its quarters because of a rent dispute. Successful American Corners operate in three other cities of Turkmenistan - Dashoguz, Mary, and Turkmenabat; the government has approved another for Balkanabad (the capital of the province that includes the Caspian Sea port city of Turkmenbashy; and Ashgabat has a full Resource Information Center in the Ak Altyn Hotel.

KAFKA WOULD FEEL AT HOME

¶4. (SBU) The young woman who directs the Turkmenbashy American Corner, Nurbibi Nuryagdiyeva, recounted to the Charge on August 11 in Turkmenbashy a frustrating voyage through opaque bureaucracy to try to reopen the Corner. The first place she found was in a busy commercial building that houses mostly small retail shops and hair salons. But local authorities, reportedly on the advice of the Foreign Ministry, told her it was inappropriate because it was not prestigious enough for "high-level foreigners to visit." The same happened for another potential site she found when the city authorities turned it down because neighborhood garbage bins were "within sight of the entrance." The city proposed to Nuryagdiyeva yet another site that she herself decided was inappropriate because the view from the windows was blocked by another building and access was difficult.

¶5. (SBU) She has now found two first-floor apartments owned by a woman intending to immigrate. The space, conveniently located on the main street of downtown Turkmenbashy, can easily be reconfigured for an American Corner. Embassy Ashgabat has permission from the Foreign Ministry to reopen the American Center, but the mayor's office has continued to follow a script straight out of Kafka. The mayor told Nuryagdiyeva to prepare a dossier of documents, which she

dutifully completed. But recently the Deputy Mayor for Culture told Nuryagdiyeva the newest site wouldn't work because other residents in the building "would complain about the health threat of radiation from all the computers."

THE MAYOR'S VERSION

¶6. (SBU) During a meeting with Turkmanbashy Mayor Ashyrniyaz Pomanov on August 11, Charge recounted the history of American Corners and encouraged him to approve the current site so that the Turkmanbashy Corner can reopen. Pomanov said he himself does not oppose this. In fact, the city is ready to help with the renovation and will provide utilities and other infrastructure support. However, only the Governor of Balkan Province and the Foreign Ministry can approve the reopening. Charge noted the Embassy already has Foreign Ministry approval and that by all accounts the ball is definitely in his court. Increasingly uncomfortable, the mayor finally said, "I must have a letter of permission from Foreign Minister Meredov."

THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S VERSION

¶7. (SBU) When Charge recounted this conversation to Meredov on August 13, he said, "Absolutely not true. We've already agreed in principle that we want the American Corner in Turkmanbashy open." He explained that he had, in fact, vetoed the proposed location in a commercial building, explaining, "It wouldn't look good for visitors to see signs out front that advertise blue jeans, hair salons, and the American Corner." He also said the current idea of joining two small apartments in an apartment building is a non-starter because by law residential space cannot be used for commercial or any other use than living quarters. Meredov said the solution he would approve would be a small stand-alone building. He added, "We are not trying to be difficult, and we certainly do not intend to spy on

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you. We simply want this done right."

¶8. (U) ACTION REQUEST: A small, stand-alone building will be more difficult to find and will be more expensive. We suggest EUR/ACE might consider if there would be funds available to outfit such a building, assuming it can be found. Please advise.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: It is unclear whether or not Meredov was being disingenuous - he usually isn't - but it does seem clear the solution lies in Ashgabat, not in Turkmanbashy. American Corners exist in other important population centers in Turkmenistan, and there would seem to be no clear reason why the government would try to block one in Turkmenbashy, especially since one had already functioned there successfully 2002-2005. Assuming modest additional funds might be available, we will pursue finding an appropriate building that meets both sides' needs. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND